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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HONG KONG 004288

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/02/2031  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [HK](#) [CH](#) [VT](#)  
SUBJECT: CARDINAL ZEN REQUESTS RETIREMENT AS BISHOP OF HONG  
KONG; WANTS TO FOCUS ON SINO-VATICAN RELATIONS

REF: HONG KONG 2949

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Classified By: E/P Chief Laurent Charbonnet. Reasons: 1.4 (b, d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Monsignor Eugene Nugent, the papal representative in Hong Kong, told us that even though Cardinal Joseph Zen has publicly stated his desire to retire as Bishop of the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese in order to concentrate on Sino-Vatican issues, he did not believe that the Pope had any immediate plans to accept Zen's resignation now. Some Vatican officials have expressed concern that Zen's retirement as Bishop might diminish his authority to speak out on religious freedom issues in China. Separately, local mainland authorities reportedly deceived Bishop An Shuxin, the underground Bishop of Baoding Diocese in Hebei Province, about the conditions of his release from prison. While An believed that he had only agreed to register with the Government, he also unwittingly registered with the Catholic Patriotic Association, a clear violation of Vatican policy. Chinese religious authorities, opined Nugent, wanted to place as many of their "own people" into positions of authority within the Catholic Church before any reconciliation between the Vatican and Beijing, especially in Hebei Province, a traditional stronghold of the underground Catholic community. Nugent also said that the visit of Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli and Monsignor Gianfranco Rota Graziosi to Beijing in June may have generated some goodwill between Vatican and Beijing negotiators, and that high level religious officials may have told provincial and diocesan officials to hold off on additional illicit bishop ordinations for now. End Summary.

Pope Not Likely to Allow Zen to Retire Now, Says Nugent  
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¶2. (C) Monsignor Eugene Nugent, the papal representative in Hong Kong, told us on October 13 that Cardinal Joseph Zen had submitted his resignation letter during his first private audience with the Pope on September 27. Zen told the press that he wanted to retire as Bishop of the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese because he hoped to play a greater role in Sino-Vatican affairs. The Cardinal will turn 75 on January 13, 2007; and according to canon law, all diocesan bishops are required to submit their resignations to the Pope upon turning 75. Zen previously submitted his resignation letter to the Pope on his 74th birthday, but received instructions at that time to remain at his post until further notice; two months later he was elevated to Cardinal. After his fifteen-minute meeting with the Pope, Zen told the "South

China Morning Post" (SCMP) on September 28 that "the Holy Father said he will consider it and said he will give me an answer next time." Nugent understood the Pope's remarks to mean Zen was to hold off on retirement plans, for now.

13. (C) Nugent said that with all of Zen's recent remarks to the press regarding his resignation plans, he sometimes wasn't sure if Zen was either extremely media savvy or perhaps a bit naive when dealing with the press. Nevertheless, Zen's candid comments about his retirement plans have sparked press speculation about possible replacements for him at the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese. Nugent told us that without direct instruction from the Holy See to begin a search for a new Bishop, he was simply not authorized to come up with a list of possible candidates. He added that to do so would be strange and "discourteous." Nugent acknowledged that two names identified in the press as possible candidates -- Vicar-General Dominic Chan and Auxiliary Bishop John Tong -- were obvious frontrunners, but that there had been no instruction from the Holy See to begin the vetting process. And if the Pope eventually accepted Zen's resignation, it was unclear whether the Cardinal might be considered for another role within the Vatican structure, said Nugent.

14. (C) It was clear that the Pope valued Zen's dual role as both defender of universal suffrage and freedom in Hong Kong, as well as advisor to the Vatican on its China policy. However, if Zen retired as Bishop of the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese he would lose his administrative base and simply become a retired Cardinal commenting on China policy, maintained Zen. Some Vatican officials have expressed concern that Zen's retirement as Bishop might diminish his authority to speak out on religious freedom issues in China. Zen has publicly stated his desire to play a greater role in the Holy See's policy towards China, but Nugent already informally consults with the Cardinal on many matters related

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to Sino-Vatican affairs.

15. (C) Zen again urged the Pope to consider convening a symposium to review and discuss the Vatican's China policy during his meeting in Rome, revealed Nugent. Now that the Pope had all of his top advisors in place, Nugent opined that there was a real possibility that the Vatican would hold such a meeting and would likely invite various experts on Sino-Vatican relations, Zen, and Cardinal Paul Shan from Taiwan.

Bishop An Registers with Patriotic Association Unknowingly

16. (C) The August 24 release of Bishop An Shuxin, the underground Bishop of Baoding Diocese in Hebei Province, after a decade in detention, sparked speculation among the Catholic community about the terms of his release. According to an August 26 "AsiaNews" report, before local authorities released An, he and the local authorities agreed that he would register with the Government but would not be required to register with the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA), which would be a violation of Vatican policy. Nugent, who has reviewed the documents related to An's release, said that while An believed that he did not register with the CPA, he was deceived into registering with the Committee for Religious Affairs, a subcommittee of the CPA.

17. (C) Nugent says that Bishop An, who was a "simple man" and not "theologically formed," was manipulated into violating Vatican policy. In recent months, local authorities only allowed three young priests to visit An in prison. These priests, who were also involved in commercial and political interests beyond their normal responsibilities as priests, were originally from the underground church but had been "worked on by local authorities," stated Nugent. After numerous visits, these priests eventually persuaded An to

agree to register with the Government in exchange for his release and to work on reconciliation efforts between the underground and official church. What An did not, and perhaps still does not understand, was that he had registered, albeit indirectly, with the Catholic Patriotic Association, said Nugent.

¶8. (C) Bishop An, perhaps unwittingly, violated another Vatican policy by concelebrating the eucharist with PRC Government-recognized Bishop Su Changshan, the auxiliary Bishop of Baoding Diocese. Around the same time that An was released, Bishop Su, who along with four others, was ordained in 2000 without Vatican approval and is still not recognized by the Holy See, sent a letter to the Vatican asking for papal recognition. It was clear, said Nugent, that the Chinese authorities orchestrated An's release to coincide with Su's letter to the Pope. Catholics from the underground church were aware that An had violated Vatican policies and were deliberately staying away from mass if presided over by Bishop An. All of these actions in Baoding Diocese were an effort to further Government efforts to control the underground church in Hebei, said Nugent, which has the largest concentration of Catholics in China and was a stronghold of the underground Catholic community. Local authorities, opined Nugent, wanted to place as many of their "own people" into positions of authority within the Catholic Church before reconciliation between the Vatican and Beijing took place.

#### Vatican's June Visit to Beijing Generates Goodwill

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¶9. (C) Over the summer, Chinese officials threatened to ordain additional bishops without Vatican approval, but thus far they have not initiated any additional illicit ordinations since May. Nugent speculated that the visit of Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli and Monsignor Gianfranco Rota Graziosi to Beijing in June may have generated some goodwill between Vatican and Beijing negotiators, and that perhaps high level religious officials told provincial and diocesan officials to hold off on illicit ordinations for now.

#### Bishop Jia Zhiguo Released for Administrative Reasons

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¶10. (C) Bishop Jia Zhiguo of Zhengding, Hebei Province, was released from police custody on September 25, after being held for ten months for "study sessions" and pressured to join the Catholic Patriotic Association, according to various

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media reports. A September 26 "AsiaNews" report speculated that local officials decided to release Jia because they were concerned that local parishioners might organize "popular protests" demanding the underground Bishop's release around the October 1 Chinese National Day holiday, but added that he would likely be detained again after the holiday. (Note: This has not yet come to pass. End Note.) Nugent told us that Jia's release was not related to possible protests or change in policies on religious freedom, but was a result of administrative and logistical issues instead. Jia was released prior to Chinese National Day since many of the security officials detailed to monitor him had time off or had been called away to provide security for other events related to the holiday celebrations.

#### Recent Arrests of Chinese Catholic Clergy

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¶11. (C) Two underground Chinese priests, recently returned from a visit to Rome where they met with the Pope, were arrested on September 25 by local authorities who feared that one of them had been secretly ordained a Bishop by the Pope, said Nugent. Father Shao Zhoumin, the vicar general of Wenzhou diocese in Zhejiang Province, and Father Jiang Sunian, the chancellor of Wenzhou diocese, both of whom have

been imprisoned before, were arrested in Shenzhen after the pair stopped by Hong Kong to meet with Nugent. The pair had told him they intended to visit a Catholic friend in Shenzhen before returning home to Wenzhou and mentioned that they were particularly nervous because they were carrying numerous photos of their visit to the Vatican. Chinese officials were suspicious that one of the young priests had been secretly ordained a Bishop by the Pope, so they sent over thirty Wenzhou police to Shenzhen to detain the two priests and transport them back to Wenzhou. According to media reports, Shao and Jiang will be charged with possession of illegal travel documents. Nugent has heard that it was common for some Catholics from the underground church to use or borrow someone else's travel documents in order to travel abroad, in order to skirt travel restrictions on underground Catholic clergy.

¶12. (C) Nugent also recounted the story of a young underground priest from Zhejiang Province who received funding to continue his theological studies in the U.S. He recently traveled to Guangzhou with the rector of his seminary to apply for a visa from the U.S. Consulate, Guangzhou. Though the young priest was successful in securing a U.S. visa, the local police from his hometown issued a search warrant for him while he and his rector were in still in Guangzhou. According to Nugent, the prospective student was currently in hiding, while the rector was under a form of "strange" soft detention back home. While the rector has been able to continue his duties running the seminary, he was required to register and sleep at a Government-designated guesthouse every evening, at his own cost.

#### Illicitly Ordained Bishops Have Reached Out to Pope

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¶13. (C) One of the official bishops who participated in the illicit ordination ceremony of Bishop Liu Xinhong of Anhui Province has not yet sent a letter of clarification to the Pope, said Nugent. This Bishop, heard Nugent, would visit Hong Kong shortly with two political "bigwigs" but, unusually, had not yet contacted Nugent or Zen for a meeting. According to Nugent, most of the bishops involved in the summer's illicit ordinations, including those who were ordained without Vatican approval and those who attended the ordination ceremonies, have written personal letters to the Pope "explaining" their actions.

#### Beijing Fears Increased Vatican Presence in Hong Kong

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¶14. (C) According to Nugent, the Chinese authorities were very curious about his plans to relocate his office from Hong Kong Island to a larger space in Kowloon and worried that this was an indication that the Vatican was planning to increase its presence in Hong Kong (see reftel). Nugent told us that he has had to be careful about the hiring of contractors and security for the new office space but hopes that it will be finished before the end of the year. Cunningham